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ABSTRACT

A discussion is presented on the role of the humanities in society and in the community colleges. First, some reflections on the status of humanities education are provided, including comments on the limitations of federal funding for projects to enhance the quality of the humanities and encourage their growth; and the difficulties facing the humanities at Tarrant County Junior College (TCJC). Next, the importance of the community colleges in providing humanities education is highlighted and trends towards increasing the humanities component of degree programs in Southern colleges are outlined. The following section discusses the increasing emphasis on high technology in education and in society and argues that an increasingly technological society will require more, rather than less, general education and humanities instruction and that a strong relationship between humanities education and technological education will enrich both areas. The next section discusses the context within which humanities education operates and underscores its role in intelligibly linking different experiences and knowledge in an individual's life. Then, observations on the humanities outside of academia emphasize the role of non-academics in contributing to the development of the humanities and promoting their study and practice. Finally, the paper discusses the future of the humanities at TCJC and outlines both external and internal pressures (e.g., financial) that challenge education at TCJC. (HB)

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OBSERVATIONS BY A CLOSET HUMANIST

REMARKS BY

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AT NORTHEAST CAMPUS FACULTY MEETING

TARRANT COUNTY JUNIOR COLLEGE

FEBRUARY 14, 1985

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OBSERVATIONS BY A CLOSET HUMANIST

It is a privilege and an honor to participate in your meeting today. It is not easy to find just the right word to describe how I felt about coming here. "Dread" and "intimidation" are both a little strong. Perhaps the word "awe" carries the more accurate connotation since it implies something of the other two words with a touch of "veneration." To be invited to be a presenter in your lecture series makes this a very special occasion for me. I do not step casually into your midst.

What does one do with 30 minutes? The question has been a troubling presence ever since arrival of Mrs. Reedy's invitation. My response follows in a few paragraphs which reflect some of my thoughts about the humanities. In sharing them with you, I hope that your goals for this series will be served.

These paragraphs did not come easily. I did a modest amount of reading and study - and discarded most of it. This little paper has evolved as a very personal thing which you will note by excessive use of the first person.

Writing is difficult for me. Choosing a title is much harder. I despise the task! In this case great care was used in selecting the words, especially the first one, "Observations". That choice puts me on perfectly safe ground. It bestows no profundity upon any point I might make and

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Remarks made by Joe B. Rushing at Northeast Campus faculty meeting, February 14, 1985. TCJC

therefore, frees me from having to defend a position should a challenge be issued.

For purposes of these observations, the definition of the humanities is what one usually finds in the typical desk dictionary. I use a broad interpretation of the definition, a prerogative assumed as the right of a speaker. My definition has the work of the 16th century sculptor, Tilman Reimenschneider as belonging to the humanities as much as that volume described by Virginia Woolf as "a translation of singular beauty,"--the Bible. My definition places language at the center of the humanities as the vehicle by which others are transmitted. It also accommodates inclusion of the Battleship Arizona monument and Salvador Dali's "Sacrament of the Last Supper", for they, too, have a cultural character.

That is the context within which these observations are made.

OBSERVATION: THE STATUS OF HUMANITIES EDUCATION

For decades, the humanities in schools and colleges have been viewed as endangered species. Declining enrollments are cause for alarm among many people from teachers of Latin to computer moguls. The proposed solutions include everything from enticement to compulsion and with infusion of large sums of money. Since President Lyndon Johnson signed the bill creating the National Endowment for the Humanities, about $3 billion in federal funds have gone into thousands of projects designed to enhance the humanities both in quality

and growth. For six years I occupied a front-row seat at that endeavor, participating in awarding grants of almost $900 million. Honesty forces me to tell you that I felt good about a little of it, depressed about some of it, and skeptical of any great value coming from most of it. It convinced me that money alone will do little to improve the health of the humanities.

It was frequently distressing to me to review proposals from prestigeous universities in which faculty told of the great and wonderous things they would accomplish if they had released time, funded, of course, by federal dollars. It distressed me because many, if not most, of the things proposed were already being done in community colleges, including our own. It made me wonder where these leaders in the humanities had been over the last two decades.

After those remarks, some of you may wonder why I have encouraged participation in a local project funded by NEH. Very frankly, it is because I believe our representatives have more to give than to receive and by their envolvement, the cause of humanities teaching may be improved for many area high school and college students.

How is the health of the humanities at TCJC? From the viewpoint of this optimist, not bad. Using a narrow and overworked criterion, look at enrollment. In the last five years, enrollments in four of our reporting categories -- letters, social sciences, languages and fine and applied arts -- have followed the general enrollment trends. There is no evidence of mass desertions from those departments.

But, enrollment does not tell everything. Students who make "A's" and "B's" in classes are not the only beneficiaries of our services. There are many other experiences which help people to know a common culture, its shared ideals and heritage. These, too, deserve our support.

OBSERVATION: HUMANITIES EDUCATION IS IMPORTANT BUSINESS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

A recent publication on the humanities in higher education gives a sobering statistic. It reports that of all undergraduate credit hours taken in the humanities, 87% are taken in the freshman and sophomore years. (Bennett, William, To Reclaim a Legacy. NEH, 1984, p.5). The fact is sobering because most of these credit hours are earned by non-humanities majors, and these introductory courses are the first and only collegiate exposure to the humanities for many students.

Community colleges have a big piece of this action. That is especially true in Texas where 63 percent of all lower division students are in the 47 public two-year colleges. Their share of this load is increasing and accompanying this increase is a growing responsibility for teaching, and promoting, the humanities. Meeting that responsibility is not easy.

Vocationalism has become a powerful force in all higher education but its impact is felt differently. In the senior college it is still possible to reserve much of the earlier

period for general education including the humanities. Not so in the two-year institution. From the first semester, specialization competes with the humanities for the student's time.

A special problem and great opportunity is immediately ahead for those who view the humanities as important elements of education. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools will soon have an accreditation requirement that at least 25% of every degree program be in general education, including the humanities. That is the opportunity. The problem is implementation. Will programs be further enriched with more credit hours in the humanities or will fewer students choose to meet graduation requirements? The answer is likely to be found in the perceived relatedness of the humanities to career education.

It is our business to demonstrate the importance of the humanities both by what we believe about these disciplines and by how we teach. This becomes increasingly significant with the expansion of technology.

OBSERVATION: THE HUMANITIES AND HIGH TECHNOLOGY

High Technology is a term that finds its way into many conversations, often introduced by people who could not define it if pressed to do so. It is the basis for conferences, speeches, and educational planning. Locally, it has been given a great deal of publicity in recent months. We will hear much more. Will high technology be the added thrust that makes career education supreme in our society? I think

not.

High tech industries, according to those who claim to know, will never require more than ten percent of the work force. Most of us will still drive trucks, raise cattle, teach school, and pursue the thousands of careers we have followed before. For that ten percent, however, the humanities may take on a new significance. It is my belief that science and technology can advance to high levels only in those societies which have a language of broad scope and complexity to support that progress. Of the thousands of different languages and dialects in the world today, English is at the forefront of those having this capability. For young Americans seeking careers in high technology and related fields, mastery of the English language may be their most valuable vocational skill. Important as computer literacy is in 1985, it is no substiute for language literacy.

High technology emerged with an international quality. Modern communications, space exploration, military engagements, low cost labor in the Orient -- these and many other factors contributed to this characteristic. Unlike the automobile industry, which is becoming internationalized only after several traumatic decades, high technology finds this a natural state. This speaks directly to the humanities. The impact goes far beyond modern languages to touch history, policitcal science, jurisprudence, ethics and in some ways almost every humanistic discipline. If there is a decline in the study of the humanities, it will not be the result of expanding study of technologies.

When the proper relationship exists between humanities

education and technological education, I believe that both will be enriched. Likewise, the students will be better served when humanities teaching is related to experiences.

OBSERVATION: THE HUMANITIES IN CONTEXT

Reading readiness is an important principle of early childhood education. Readiness for the humanities may also be worth consideration. This has little to do with chronological age but rather with connectedness, on intelligible joining to other experience or knowledge.

Long ago, a friend introduced me to those literary siblings, Justine, Balthazar, Cleo and Mountolive. The four comprise the Alexandria Quartet, a work that moved Lawrence Durrell to the forefront among modern writers. I read all four of the small volumes. Perhaps, "waded through" is a more appropriate term, for it was tedious going.

One weekend last fall, while browsing for something to read, I removed Justine from my bookshelf where she had rested for twenty years, untouched by anything save an occasional dusting cloth. From the first page I noted a remarkable difference in both understanding and gratification. Why? Perhaps the second reading was a factor. The author's style was no longer new. The sounds, the names, the smells, the narrow winding streets of the Middle East are now a part of my own experience. A more mature and enlightened outlook on sex may also be a factor. Whatever the reasons, I have much greater readiness for the Alexandria Quartet in 1985 than in 1965.

The nature of our student body is well known to all of us. The ranges of age, ability and experience are very broad. The best systems of testing and sectioning can only alleviate the problem, never eliminate it. The most effective responses to this heterogenity are the sensitivity and wisdom of the humanities teacher.

We all must live and work within constraints, most of them necessary. For teachers of the humanities these constraints may be found in catalog course descriptions, syllabi, departmental regulations and obsession with transferability. Without doing violence to those things which are necessary for an orderly, effective, educational program, degrees of readiness for the humanities can be accommodated through creativity, spontaneity, and some extra effort.

We have many allies outside our own ranks. They are potential resources of special value as we seek to make those connections with experience.

OBSERVATION: THE HUMANITIES OUTSIDE ACADEMIA

The academic Community is not the sole owner and custodian of the humanities. A trite statement? Yes. It is true, however, that many humanists are too often unable to present a more positive image for the humanities by failing to properly acknowledge the contributions of non-collegiate scholars. Nevertheless, the world is richer because of the Edwin Newmans who bring us the news in superb English; the Barbara Tuchmans who dare to defy orthodox historians to describe the 14th Century in language that reads like an exciting novel; the

unknown Frank Snepps who challenge the bureaucracy to disclose incompetence, call a disaster a disaster, and give an important viewpoint, if not the definitive answer; and the Winston Churchills who, with their language skills and massive egos, enrich our literature and lives.

All about us are lawyer-historians, homemaker-authors, and physician-artists. There are also unintentional humanists who if called by the name, would have broken an arm or two. Their fortunes made in publishing, groceries, and oil are the sources of rich cultural experiences for all of us in this part of Texas.

These are our colleagues. They have much to offer in support of efforts to promote the study and practice of the humanities.

OBSERVATION: WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF THE HUMANITIES TARRANT COUNTY JUNIOR COLLEGE?

I have already noted the numbers. But what of the future? Will we be satisfied to merely maintain enrollment for job security? Are there clues to what the future may hold?

Educational reform in Texas' public schools has a six months history. To classify that history as undistinguished would be premature. The most optimistic results will be years in coming even if the reforms are allowed to stand. Should that happen, the results will be felt in Tarrant County Junior College.

Ideally, it could bring to our doors many more students with better command of the English language. (That ability,

incidentally, has just been cited in a research report as the most accurate predictor of success in college, even for the science major). We could hope that our classes in history, foreign languages and literature will be filled to capacity with the students who have been turned on to the humanities by energetic and enterprising teachers in the high schools. But that is probably in the distant future.

Of more immediate concern is the increasing pressure to move vocational education to post secondary institutions.

I am frequently asked if Tarrant County Junior College can assume a larger share of this if the public secondary schools become academic institutions. So far, I have managed to be appropriately vague with my answers. On the one hand our mission statement commits us to a positive response to community needs. On the other, the financial and educational implications are awesome.

So much for one source of external influence on the humanities at TCJC. What about intrinsic conditions that bear on the future of those disciplines? Beyond degree requirements in communications and social heritage, we have little to say about the humanities in college publications. The long history of most humanities disciplines has added much to their prestige, but little to their newsworthiness when in competition for publicity with computers, lasers, and other exotic new arrivals. I am a little troubled by the rush to degree acquisition which often by-passes academic subjects. I am troubled even more by our apparent willingness

to accept this without question. There is the enigma of grade reports which raise questions about the depth and scope of the curriculum.

In an earlier paragraph I referred to Bill Bennett's little pamphlet, To Reclaim a Legacy. It is the result of an armchair study by some distinguished people and makes no claim to having the final solution to perceived problems in the humanities. It does set forth two basic prerequisites for learning in the humanities, good teaching, and a good curriculum. Not one of us would disagree with the panel on these points. The questions arise over what characterizes good teaching and what constitutes a good curriculum.

If humanities faculties can define and achieve good teaching, and if an appropriate curriculum is in place, does that assure a thriving future for the humanities at TCJC? I think not. If every degree plan includes courses in the humanities, placed there by administrative edict or departmental trade-off, will it result in a better educated constituency? No. Can we develop convincing proof that learning in the humanities is a valuable vocational asset with appropriate rewards? Not likely. What must occur if the humanities are to become the common component that permeates all teaching and learning in our college. There is no quick fix or easy answer.

Defending the humanities as refining experiences will accomplish little. Attempts to prove they are not mere educational luxuries would be a waste of time. The humanities

will occupy the place which I deem proper when there is a pervading conviction about the centrality of the humanities. That conviction cannot be limited to humanities faculty. It must extend throughout the college family. If this ever occurs, we need never be concerned about the future of the humanities at Tarrant County Junior College.

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